

## The Life of the Unobtrusive Observer

*by Travis Satterlund* Field observation is one of many tools in the evaluator's work belt. And though it may seem like it's just a matter of picking a spot, watching, and recording the data, it actually takes proper training. So, whether you're making observations of smoking behavior at parks, beaches or piers, or during festivities such as fairs, parades or rodeos, or in enclosed spaces like multi-unit housing (MUH) complexes, it's important to do it in the right way. For almost three years, I was part of a research team evaluating California's Indoor Smoke-free Workplace Act as it pertained to stand-alone bars and taverns in San Francisco and Alameda Counties. The observations were done in an attempt to decipher why some bars became smoke-free after the Indoor Act was passed, while others remained in opposition of the law. Getting "inside" and conducting observations seemed the best way to find out.

My job was seemingly simple: enter a designated bar (based on random sampling), take a seat, order a drink, and observe smoking behavior. Working with an assigned partner for safety reasons, we took note of demographic information about the patrons and bartenders, number of people smoking, if they used ashtrays, whether the bar sold cigarettes, and so on.

Observations lasted about one hour after which my partner and I would meet to discuss and enter the data into our handheld personal digital



assistant (PDA). Later on we also wrote up more detailed field notes about the clientele of the bar, its "vibe", and everything smoking related, all of which provided a narrative for each bar observation.

Because of my experience conducting observations, I have a few tips for data collectors. First of all, **be as unobtrusive as possible**. By this, I mean that an observer should try his or her best not to disrupt the natural activity that is taking place. Blend in. Do not carry your notebook or observation form with you. Instead, look like you belong wherever you are; wear clothing that matches the setting. In

essence, act like you are simply doing what other people are doing.

The most important advice I can give is to **act as if you belong**, no matter where you are. You

really have to be an actor. If you don't blend in, people will be suspicious. I learned this early, and always felt like I could fit into almost any type of establishment -- whether it was a working class bar, an upscale wine bar, or anything in between.

A huge part of this was simply acting like we belonged. So, we would simply order our drinks and make small talk with each other or sometimes the bartender. Once everyone saw that our actions were like those of the other patrons, their suspicions were lowered and normal activity typically presided.

Another very important tip: **Make sure you get a complete picture** of what is taking place at any one location. This, more than anything, is your job. To do this correctly, you will probably need to do a bit of sleuthing, looking for cigarette butts and cigarette-related litter. But it's vital that you do this covertly without it looking out of the ordinary (remember, you want to blend in and not raise suspicions).

You will also need to **visit a location more than once and at different times**. During our bar observations we found that it was not unusual for a bar to be "non-smoking" during the day and early evening hours, and then allow smoking after a certain time in the evening or closer to "last call." (We found out later that bar staff wanted to make sure that health inspectors, who almost always worked exclusively during the days, would not be "busting" the place). Similarly, there may be smoking at certain places -- such as at a fair beer garden -- exclusively at night. So be sure to make observations at different times of the day and document the times and places.



My final tip may be the most important, and it follows the theme of this newsletter: **Train, train, and train**. As part of my initial training, we had three sessions with trainers -- two of which were in bars -- showing us what we should be looking for in our observations. We then conducted four "practice" runs, observing bars, learning cues, and filling out information in our PDAs and writing field notes. These training runs were critical so that we weren't showing up for "real" observations with no experience. This made a big difference. It also allowed us to catch "bugs" in our PDA survey instrument and learn how to write better field notes.

Again, I cannot stress enough the value and import of proper training. As has been detailed throughout this edition of the newsletter, **the training can make or break your evaluation**.

With all this in mind, we at TCEC look forward to hearing about your own observation stories. Get out into the field and see what's happening!

*Photos by: Victor LLarana, Library of Congress and Paul J.S.*